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## Article

# Haiti's Pact with the Devil?: *Bwa Kayiman*, Haitian Protestant Views of Vodou, and the Future of Haiti

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**Abstract:** This essay uses ethnographic research conducted among Haitian Protestants in the Bahamas in 2005 and 2012 plus internet resources to document the belief among Haitian Protestants (Haitians who practice Protestant forms of Christianity) that Haiti supposedly made a pact with the Devil (Satan) as the result of *Bwa Kayiman*, a Vodou ceremony that launched the Haitian Revolution (1791–1803). Vodou is the syncretized religion indigenous to Haiti. I argue that this interpretation of *Bwa Kayiman* is an extension of the negative effects of the globalization of American Fundamentalist Christianity in Haiti and, by extension, peoples of African descent and the Global South.

**Keywords:** Haitians; Protestants; Christianity; Bahamas; Vodou; Globalization; Human Rights

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On 12 January 2010, a 7.0 earthquake devastated Port-au-Prince, Leogane, and other parts of Haiti. The earthquake destroyed parts of Haiti's fragile infrastructure, claimed the lives of over 200,000 Haitians and left over 1 million homeless. The day after this catastrophe, Reverend Pat Robertson, an influential voice in the American Evangelical Fundamentalist movement made the following comments on the 700 club, a syndicated news show for the Christian Broadcasting Network which reaches over a billion households worldwide:

"Something happened a long time ago in Haiti, and people might not want to talk about it," he said on Christian Broadcasting Network's "The 700 Club." "They were under the heel of the French. You know, Napoleon III, or whatever. And they got together and swore a pact to the devil. They said, we will serve you if you'll get us free from the French. True story. And so, the devil said, okay it's a deal."

Robertson said that "ever since, they have been cursed by one thing after the other" and he contrasted Haiti with its neighbor, the Dominican Republic.

"That island of Hispaniola is one island. It is cut down the middle; on the one side is Haiti on the other is the Dominican Republic," he said. "Dominican Republic is prosperous, healthy, full of resorts, etc. Haiti is in desperate poverty. Same island. They need to have and we need to pray for them a great turning to God and out of this tragedy I'm optimistic something good may come. But right now we are helping the suffering people and the suffering is unimaginable."<sup>1</sup>

The historical moment that Pat Robertson interpreted through a worldview tempered by American Evangelicalism was a Vodou ceremony known in Haitian history as *Bwa Kayiman* (Bois Caïman), which

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<sup>1</sup> <http://mediamatters.org/mmtv/201001130024>.

launched the Haitian Revolution (1791–1803). Despite the humanitarian efforts of Operation Blessing International, a charitable organization founded by Pat Robertson assisting Haitians with earthquake relief at the time<sup>2</sup>, Robertson's remarks struck many as callous and racist.

But missing in some of the responses to Pat Robertson's remarks in the midst of an unimaginable tragedy, which included condemnations<sup>3</sup> and historical essays (Gates 2010)<sup>4</sup> critiquing Robertson's fundamentalist interpretation of Haitian history, is an important reality of the contemporary Haitian religious landscape which has been neglected thus far in the myriad reactions to Robertson's comments and bears analysis: some Haitians (Haitian Protestants, in particular) also believe that Haiti is cursed due to a pact their ancestors made with the "Devil" at the beginning of the Haitian Revolution. The history of Protestantism in Haiti was partly influenced by the migration of American missionaries who interacted with Haitians throughout the 20th and 21st centuries. The production of Haitian Protestant views that resonate with American Fundamentalist Christianity then come from this history of interaction and mirrors global flows of cultural forms like Protestant Christianity.

## 1. Haitian Protestantism at Home and Abroad

The majority religions of Haiti are Catholicism and Vodou. But Protestant Christianity has grown steadily in Haiti within a historical context of revolutionary triumph, poverty, foreign interference, state repression of the Haitian people and recent environmental disasters. Protestantism in Haiti has two major religious traditions: historical (or puritanical) Protestantism and Pentecostal and charismatic Protestantism (P/C). Historical Protestantism refers to the earlier forms of Protestant Christianity in Haiti that began when the Wesleyan Missionary Society established a missionary base in 1817 (Louis 2017).<sup>5</sup> This includes the Methodist and Baptist faiths and stresses reserved, sober and unemotional forms of worship and an austere dress code for its adherents. Continuing in the 19th Century (1823–1873), the first Baptists in Haiti evangelized throughout the country. Among them were three men of African descent from the United States: Thomas Paul, William Monroe, and Arthur Waring. Their missionary work was conducted from 1823 to 1870 and was sponsored by the Massachusetts Baptist Missionary Society, the Baptist General Convention, and the American Baptist Free Mission Society. American Baptist missionaries, English Baptist missionaries, and Jamaican Baptist missionaries built on the work of the previous pioneers by establishing a Baptist presence in Port-au-Prince, Dondon, Cap Haitien, Port-de-Paix and Petite Goave. During this period Jacmel became a home base for Baptists. From these sections (southeastern coast, regions around the capital and St. Marc, a section of the northern coast, and the northern part of the central plateau) missionary work began to spread. The mission of these Protestant groups are described by Africana Studies scholar Celucien Joseph as follows: "to evangelize the Haitian people and to win the Haitian soul for Christ; to transform Haiti into a Christian nation; and to eradicate Vodou from the Haitian soil." Like Pat Robertson, Protestant missionaries "constructed a Vodouphobic discourse whose central premise was the rehabilitation and redemption of the Haitian people and their lost souls (Joseph 2016, p. 247).

<sup>2</sup> Operation Blessings International (<http://www.ob.org/haitiprojects/index.asp>).

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.newsweek.com/2010/01/14/why-god-hates-haiti.html>.

<sup>4</sup> <http://www.theroot.com/views/curse-haiti>.

<sup>5</sup> The roots of Protestant Christianity in Haiti can be traced as early as 1661 in the French colony of Saint Domingue in 1661. Protestant Christianity was excluded thereafter by the revocation of the Edict of Nantes in 1685. According to Haitian religious scholar Louis (2007), the firm implantation of Protestantism in Haiti would occur after the Haitian Revolution and independence. The reestablishment of Protestantism in Haiti began in 1816 when Stephen Grellet, a French-born American Quaker missionary and John Hancock from the United States, visited the new nation for a meeting with Alexandre Pétion, the Haitian ruler at that time. At the meeting they presented the Haitian president with bibles and Grellet preached "the word of the Lord." In 1817 President Alexandre Pétion invited missionaries John Brown and James Catts to perform a mission, thirteen years after Haitian independence. Ivah Heneise (1999), a historian of the Baptist faith in Haiti, also observes the contributions of the English Wesleyan Mission, headed by John Brown and James Catts, to the initial development of Protestantism in Haiti. This author also mentions that the Wesleyan Missionary Society decided to establish a missionary base in Haiti, based on Brown and Catts' reports beginning a trend of foreign missionaries planting Protestant forms of Christianity in Haiti (Louis 2017).

From 1873 to 1923, the Baptist faith grew due to the work of foreign, indigenous and independent missionaries. Jacmel grew as an area of Baptist witness and, according to Heneise, an effective type of evangelism developed as the result of the use of Haitian Creole in the translation of the Bible and the use of Haitian Creole as the language of evangelizing (Heneise 1999). Although Protestantism grew in Haiti in the 19th century, Catholicism and Vodou continued to be the religions that the ruling classes and peasantry practiced.

In the 20th century Protestantism made more inroads in Haiti initially facilitated by American imperialist power. As medical anthropologist Farmer (1994) and Religious Studies scholar McAlister (2006) observe, the American Marine occupation of Haiti (1915–1934) brought Haiti squarely under U.S. dominance. In 1915 a treaty, the “Convention haitiano-américaine,” granted the United States complete administrative and political control over Haiti. Haitian resistance to the occupation occurred throughout its duration, but intensified after the U.S. Marines reinstated the *corvée* (forced labor crews). As Farmer correctly comments, the round-up of several thousand men did not sit well with Haitian memories of white domination 125 years earlier, and resulted in the “Cacos Insurrection” led by Charlemagne Peralte with the U.S. Marines eventually quelling the peasant rebellion (Farmer 1994, pp. 83–85). During the period of occupation anthropologist Conway (1978) writes that the occupation did not involve a great increase in American Protestant missionary activity. It was not until the 1940s, Conway comments, that large-scale mission work in Haiti began (Conway 1978, p. 164).

The expansion of Protestantism in Haiti continued as the result of increased foreign and indigenous mission work in Haitian Creole, the language of the people. Protestantism also spread in Haiti due to tensions between the Haitian state, the Catholic Church, and Vodou practitioners. As historian Kate Ramsey observes, the Haitian state created a new penal category (under Sténio Vincent), a “year after the departure of U.S. marines from Haiti in 1934 (Ramsey 2011, p. 177) against *les pratiques superstitieuses* (superstitious practices [practices related to Vodou]) under the penal category of *sortilèges* (183). Throughout its history many within Haitian Catholic church hierarchy tried to force Haitians to turn away from Vodou and practice Catholicism exclusively. For example, in 1941 the Catholic Church started a brutal anti-superstition campaign against Vodou adherents with the assistance of police force from the Haitian state (Desmangles 1992, p. 53). An objective of this antisuperstition campaign was to destroy the physical (flags representing *lwa* [spirits related to Vodou] for example) and cultural attributes of Vodou (such as dance) and to sweep away the ancestral beliefs of the masses which made Haitian society, in the opinion of Catholic religious figures, a “primitive” and “uncivilized” country. This effort was part of a larger history of anti-superstition campaigns and state repression (in the form of state policy) that considered the enduring practice of Vodou to be “superstition, fetishism, idolatry, and the main obstacle to modernization and Christian evangelization of the Haitian people (Joseph 2016, p. 246)”. Protestantism gained an advantage from the confrontation between Roman Catholics and Vodou practitioners by repositioning itself within the anti-Vodou space opened by the Catholic Church. Protestantism was also a target of the antisuperstition campaigns<sup>6</sup>.

In his classic text “Voodoo in Haiti,” Alfred Métraux (1958) analyzed Protestantism in Haiti as it related to Vodou. Métraux explained that Haitians chose Protestantism as a way to protect themselves from Vodou *lwa* and demons. Haitians also turned to Protestantism as a spiritual alternative to the religious sphere dominated by Catholicism and Vodou. In addition to the efforts of the Catholic Church in the eradication of Vodou culture, Protestantism offered services and opportunities to Haitians that the Haitian state had not provided in full to its citizens such as literacy, access to education, job training, and employment through churches and contacts with foreign missionaries who had more resources

<sup>6</sup> Historian Kate Ramsey writes that the anti-Vodou (antisuperstition) campaign during 1941 was also against “the growing size and influence of Protestant denominations at this time (Ramsey 2011, p. 197).” Apparently this was reflected in antisuperstition oaths that required “Catholics to swear both that they were “completely finished with superstitions” and they would never become Protestants (ibid). This was due to the “growing prestige and influence of Protestantism in Haiti at this time (ibid)”.

than them. Therefore, Protestantism, at that time and currently, continues to be a strategy Haitians arm themselves with to combat illness and economic and social inequality in their homeland and abroad. Furthermore, foreign missionaries attributed the realities of underdevelopment in Haiti primarily to Vodou instead of attributing them to foreign interference and Haitian political instability.

This view, proposed by foreign missionaries and some devout Haitian Protestants, is solely a spiritual one ignoring other factors scholars of Haiti mention. For example, Haitian sociologist Alex Dupuy (1989) contends Haiti's misfortune can be traced to its poor insertion in the world economy. Historian Leslie Alexander (2011) argues that the combination of American military intervention and the repayment of an indemnity of 200 million francs to France since the 19th century have contributed to poverty and underdevelopment in contemporary Haiti. Anthropologist Nina Glick Schiller and Africana Studies scholar Glick Schiller and Fouron (2001) use the term "apparent state" to explain the Haitian state as having almost no independent authority to make meaningful changes within their territorial borders. In their opinion this view partly explains Haiti's current condition. Evangelical power from the United States and the Protestant population in Haiti, considered the only way to reverse underdevelopment in Haiti, was through the "catalytic action of the Christian Gospel (Heneise 1999, p. 179)". From this point Haitians established more Protestant institutions (churches, hospitals and schools) that helped to spread this form of Christianity throughout Haiti and enrolled their children in Protestant schools that contributes to their world view which resonates with other fundamentalist world views of Haiti most notably expressed by Rev. Pat Robertson in the wake of the Haiti earthquake of 2010.

Pentecostal and charismatic Protestantism grew exponentially during François "Papa Doc" Duvalier's reign (1957–1971) as he sought to weaken the powers of the Catholic Church. Haiti was flooded with American missionaries who provided the Haitian populace with social services that Haitian state was responsible for but neglected, such as education and potable water. Pentecostal and charismatic forms of Christianity stress energetic worship that is guided by *Sentespri* (the Holy Spirit).<sup>7</sup> Like those who practice faiths from the historical Protestant tradition, Haitian P/C adherents also follow an austere dress code. In interviews conducted in fieldwork in 2005, migrants referred to historical Protestant churches as *touloutoutou* (or *tilititi*) churches, or as churches that were *Batis* (Baptist) and/or *twò Batis* (very Baptist). Members and believers of these traditional Protestant churches sometimes referred to adherents of Pentecostal and charismatic churches with the pejorative term *les trembleurs*, the French term for tremblers (Louis 2014).

Protestants did not present a monolithic front to the Duvalier regime. Anthropologist Frederick Conway mentions that because missionaries of differing churches and denominations were competing with each other, fiercely at times, they were not in a position to oppose the government as a group (Conway 1978, p. 166). Protestantism among Haitians at home (Haiti) and abroad (its diaspora) also has a tradition regarding politics that varies from Protestant non-involvement, limited involvement, opposition to state policies, and collusion with state forces intended to control and marginalize Haitian populations that continued its expansion throughout Haiti and its diaspora. In cases of Protestant non-involvement in politics in Haiti, this type of detachment stems partially from the doctrines of the religions that make up Protestantism. But the lack of involvement in political life in Haiti comes more from the experience of living in a historical period that started with the presidency of François Duvalier. The Duvalier regime was a particularly oppressive form of state power that used the Haitian army and a secret force called the Tonton Macoutes to eliminate any political opposition to the Duvalier regime.

After dictator Jean-Claude "Baby Doc" Duvalier left Haiti aboard a jet chartered by the U.S. government in 1986, Jean-Bertrand Aristide, a Catholic priest who was part of a Catholic church movement that questioned the basis of social inequalities in Haiti and encouraged discussion of social

<sup>7</sup> The Holy Spirit is also referred to as *lasentespri* in northern and northwestern Haitian locales such as Bassin Bleu, Gonaïves, Jean Rabel, and Port-de-Paix, where many Haitian Protestant migrants emanate from. Elsewhere in Haiti, the Holy Spirit is also referred to as *lespri Bondye* (the Spirit of God).



reform, was elected president of Haiti in 1991. Aristide was the second elected leader of Haiti and was popular among its poor inhabitants. He was overthrown twice: first in 1991 and then again in 2004.<sup>8</sup> As a result of political instability, environmental disasters, unemployment and continued foreign interference in Haitian affairs, Haitians of differing religious backgrounds continue to leave Haiti. One of the countries that they migrate to is the Bahamas.

Haitians convert to Protestant forms of Christianity for numerous reasons. One reason is that conversion provides them protection from the harm and misfortune they associate with Vodou. Some convert as the result of a long-standing illness while others convert as a way to improve their economic standing because of economic opportunities Protestant churches provide and their connections to affluent American transnational religious networks. Others are raised within Haitian Protestant families and churches and are educated in schools associated with Protestant churches, which help to shape the cultural practices and worldviews of devout Haitian Protestants. Additionally, increasing numbers of Haitians, both at home and abroad, practice various forms of Protestant Christianity, such as Pentecostalism and the Baptist, Nazarene, and Methodist faiths. It appears that the majority of Haitians in the Bahamas (30,000 to 60,000 Haitians in a country with a population of nearly 400,000<sup>9</sup>) practice Protestant forms of Christianity. According to an International Organization for Migration report, when responding to survey questions concerning the religion they currently practiced, 27.7 percent of Haitians interviewed in 2005 responded “Catholic” whereas 29.1 percent replied “Anglican”, “Baptist”, or Pentecostal (College of the Bahamas 2005, p. 100). These figures suggest that there is a new religious plurality among Haitians in the Bahamas, whereas in 1979, geographer Dawn Marshall remarked that the typical Haitian migrant was “almost certainly a Roman Catholic (Marshall 1979, p. xiii).”<sup>10</sup>

In 2005 interviews conducted with Haitian Protestants in New Providence, Bahamas some of my research consultants believed that Haiti “got its freedom the wrong way” because of a Vodou ceremony at *Bwa Kayiman* that launched the Haitian revolution in 1791, the same Vodou ceremony which Pat Robertson referred to as a “pact with the Devil” in his untimely commentary after the earthquake. What happened at *Bwa Kayiman* that would make some contemporary Haitian Protestants believe that their enslaved ancestors, who survived high mortality rates from their capture and forced marches from the interiors of Africa to the coasts, the rigors of the Middle Passage, which included diseases, malnutrition, and murder on the open sea, a deadly seasoning process, physically demanding plantation production processes, and physical and psychological violence, “got their freedom the wrong way?”<sup>11</sup> The answer partly lies in the context and conditions of Saint Domingue and Haitian Protestant views of Vodou.

<sup>8</sup> Distinct forms of Protestantism in Haiti developed by this time in Haitian history. Haitian sociologist and a leading scholar of Haitian Protestantism Studies, Romain (1986) discusses three forms of Protestantism in Haitian society, which differs from my organization and representation of Haitian Protestantism (Historical Protestantism and Haitian P/C). The first form occurred during the initial implantation of Protestantism in Haiti and is represented by the Episcopal (Eglise Episcopale d’Haïti), Methodist (Eglise Méthodiste d’Haïti, Eglise Afro-Méthodiste Episcopale, Eglise Méthodiste Libre) and Wesleyan churches (Eglise Wesleyenne d’ Haïti) (Romain 1986). Romain distinguishes three other forms of Protestantism in Haitian society: Protestantisme de Santification (Protestantism of Santification—includes Seventh Day Adventist churches and Baptist churches), Protestantisme de 3e Réforme (Protestantism of the 3rd Reform—which is characterized with different Pentecostal sects) and Protestantisme Mixte (mixed Protestantism—evangelical churches, Salvation Army, and the Nazarene church).

<sup>9</sup> <http://worldpopulationreview.com/countries/bahamas-population/>.

<sup>10</sup> More research needs to be done about the history and development of Haitian Protestantism in the Bahamas. *My Soul Is in Haiti* begins to address the small amount of research about the Protestant religious lives of Haitians in the Bahamas. Specifically, in my research in three Haitian Protestant churches in New Providence (Louis 2014) and in numerous interviews in the larger Haitian Protestant community, however, I found that the overwhelming majority of Haitians in my sample had been baptized before they touched Bahamian soil. In fact, only three of the twenty-five Protestants from Haiti whom I interviewed (12 percent) had converted in New Providence. The remaining 88 percent had converted and been baptized in Haiti (Louis 2014, pp. 72–73).

<sup>11</sup> Hilliard d’Auberteuil noted during the years from 1680 to 1776 that over 800,000 Africans were imported from Africa to Saint-Domingue (colonial Haiti). By the end of that period there were only 290,000 Africans (Fick 1990, p. 26). These figures suggest that Africans were not reproducing themselves quickly enough in Saint-Domingue as a result of the effects of the process of slave-making and the physical demands of plantation labor.

## 2. Chattel Slavery in Saint Domingue, Vodou, and *Bwa Kayiman*

Africans who survived the rigors of the passage from Africa to the French colony of Saint Domingue were sold as chattel. Once they reached a plantation, Africans were assigned slave tutors who showed them how to perform the different tasks, which were necessary for production of coffee, indigo, tobacco, and sugar: commodities that would eventually be consumed throughout the world. Through force and domination, Africans became slaves through different labor production processes. As slaves, in a colony roughly the size of the state of Maryland (27,750 square kilometers), who produced indigo, tobacco, and, at one point in history, two-fifths of the world's sugar and almost half of the world's coffee, it was common for slave masters to use violent, coercive mechanisms to maintain plantation labor production processes. So it was not uncommon, as Haitian sociologist Alex Dupuy writes, to:

... Hang a slave by the ears, mutilate a leg, pull teeth out, gash open one's side and pour melted lard into the incision, or mutilate genital organs. Still others used the torture of live burial, whereby the slave, in the presence of the rest of the slaves who were forced to bear witness, was made to dig his own grave [...]. Women had their sexual parts burned by a smoldering log; others had hot wax splattered over hands, arms, and backs, or boiling cane syrup poured over their heads (Dupuy 1989).

All of these heinous acts were committed to force slaves to perform their duties on plantations and enrich white planters. In addition to physically and demanding plantation labor production processes, Le Code Noir (Black Code), a document that established the rules of slavery in French America, prescribed baptism and instruction in the Catholic religion for all enslaved Africans and deemed assemblies of enslaved Africans for purposes other than Catholic worship illegal (Simpson 1945). However, secret assemblages occurred amongst the slaves where elements of African religions and rites were kept alive through the creation of the religion called Vodou.

Formed between 1750 and 1790 on the plantations of Saint Domingue, Vodou is the Fongbe (Benin) term for "spirit". In Haitian Creole, Vodou refers to a "genre of ritual music and dance performed in honor of a category of spirit. Spirits are called *lwa* and can be thought of as super human beings who are inherited through family lines among land-holding descent groups. Said to be from *Ginen* (Africa) and to dwell there still, *lwa* crystallize a deep historical memory of the violence and displacement of the African ancestors' past. Reflective of their creolized history, some *lwa* are based on Catholic saints and many have African names (Richman 2005)". Within the context of plantation life, the syncretism of Vodou enabled slave subterfuge of African religious rites and resistance. The practice of Vodou played an important role in the struggle for liberation among enslaved Africans against colonial powers because, as anthropologist Leslie Desmangles observes, the rituals of Vodou provided the spirit of kinship that fueled the slaves' revolt against their colonial masters (Desmangles 1992). The practice of Vodou and the struggle for liberation from the rigors of chattel slavery converged during the *Bwa Kayiman* Vodou Congress in 1791.

Part of the Haitian national narrative well known among Haitians is the *Bwa Kayiman* Vodou Congress led by Boukman. Boukman was a maroon who escaped from a plantation near Morne Rouge and led a Vodou ceremony that was pivotal to the beginning of the Haitian Revolution. James (1963) notes the importance of this historical moment in a stirring account of the ceremony that occurred on August 1791:

A tropical storm raged, with lightning and gusts of wind and heavy showers of rain ... There Boukman gave the last instructions and, after Vodou incantations and the sucking of the blood of a stuck pig, he stimulated his followers by a prayer spoken in creole, which, like so much spoken on such occasions, has remained. "The god who created the sun which gives us light, who rouses the waves and rules the storm, though hidden in the clouds, he watches us. He sees all that the white man does. The god of the white man inspires us with crime, but our god calls upon us to do good works. Our god who is good to us orders us to revenge our wrongs. He will direct our arms and aid us.



Throw away the symbol of the god of the whites who has caused us to weep, and listen to the voices of liberty, which speaks in the hearts of us all (James 1963, p. 87)."

Six days later, slaves of the Turpin plantation led by Boukman indiscriminately massacred every white man, woman child they could find (Simpson 1945). This began a general insurrection that would lead to the Haitian Revolution, the only successful slave revolt in the Western Hemisphere that extended the rights of liberty, brotherhood and equality to black people and articulated common humanity and equality for all Haitian citizens.<sup>12</sup>

### 3. Bwa Kayiman: Replacing the Blood of the Pig with the Blood of Jesus

Although the story of *Bwa Kayiman*, with its practice of Vodou as tool that broke the chains of chattel slavery in Saint Domingue, inspires many Haitians and other people of African descent who share a similar history of bondage (i.e., African Americans), some Haitian Protestants today find the history of the *Bwa Kayiman* ceremony offensive and the contemporary practice of Vodou as immoral. Some also believe that the ceremony was the exact historical moment when Haiti was "consecrated to the Devil." Thus the legacy of *Bwa Kayiman*, by extension, ensured a history of misery in Haiti that is evidenced by the underdevelopment, political corruption, and societal unrest that grips it in 2019 and, for some, likely lies as the root cause of the 12 January 2010 earthquake.

This alternative interpretation of *Bwa Kayiman* is clearly articulated by Chavannes Jeune, a pastor and evangelist from Les Cayes, Haiti, a former candidate for the Haitian presidency in 2005, and a former advisor to Haitian President Michel Martelly. As of 2016 he headed the Evangelical Baptist Mission South of Haiti (MEBSH)<sup>13</sup> and was also the catalyst for "Haiti for the Third Century," an interdenominational evangelical organization whose main purpose is to "take Haiti back from the devil and dedicate her to Jesus Christ." Pastor Chavannes believes that the nation of Haiti is enmeshed in spiritual bondage because "the country was dedicated by a Vodou priest (Boukman) at its liberation" and "[Haiti] has been in bondage to the devil for four generations (Barrick 2005).<sup>14</sup>"

Haitian Protestants whom I interviewed acknowledged that Vodou is part of Haitian culture and that it is a part of their *rasin* (roots). But Protestantism, as Romain (1986) explains, is a religion of rupture. This rupture occurs with *lemonn* (the secular world) and the rejection of Vodou is essential to becoming an authentic *Kretyen* (Christian). The maintenance of their religious identities is also reinforced by sharing similar religious practices of prayer, the ritualistic use of Protestant hymnody, *temwayaj* (testifying), and fasting, the use of a shared vocabulary, and rejecting Vodou. These are shared aspects of a religious culture that unifies Protestants of different denominational backgrounds (Adventist, Baptist, Methodist and Pentecostal, for example) across time and space. As Frederick Conway (1978), an American anthropologist who wrote one of the first ethnographies in English about Haitian Pentecostalism recognizes, "the fine theological distinctions which separate the various Protestant denominations are not particularly meaningful to Haitians. That all Protestant organizations oppose Vodou and promise protection to those who reject Vodou is more significant (p. 169)." Therefore, many Haitian Protestants like Pastor Chavannes view Vodou as a "satanic" way of life that invites *move espri* (evil spirits) to adversely affect the lives of the living. Therefore, the continued practice of Vodou can be seen as responsible for Haiti's underdevelopment, continuing governmental corruption, and the country's endemic poverty.

Religious studies scholar Elizabeth McAlister observes (McAlister 2006) that the evangelical re-writing of *Bwa Kayiman* also has implications in the fight for Haiti's future between Haitian Protestants and the rest of Haiti. A group of Haitian Protestants called "Vision: Haiti" marched on

<sup>12</sup> For more about the *Bwa Kayiman* ceremony see (Dubois 2004). Also refer to Chapter One of *The Spirits and the Law: Vodou and Power in Haiti* (Ramsey 2011) which discusses academic work dealing with *Bois-Caiman/Bwa Kayiman*.

<sup>13</sup> <https://rezonodwes.com/2016/08/05/presidentielle-chavannes-jeune-abandonne-la-course-au-profit-du-pasteur-maxo-joseph/>.

<sup>14</sup> <http://www.libertypressnews.com/modules/news/print.php?storyid=1>.

14 August 1998 to *Bwa Kayiman* with the intent to exorcise Vodou spirits to “win Bois Caiman (*Bwa Kayiman*) for Jesus” by performing a Jericho march. In the Jericho march, a group circles a space seven times in the name of Jesus, “commanding its walls to fall down (McAlister 2006).” The ritual can be interpreted as a direct challenge to the politics of national heritage in Haiti and a confrontation with the Haitian state. The Haitian government at that time considered the Evangelical ceremony an insult to national pride. By undoing that contract and claiming the birthplace of the Haitian nation for Jesus, however, the pastors saw themselves as symbolically winning “Haiti for Jesus” and “converted” the entire nation to evangelicalism (McAlister 2006, p. 18).

Based on the report of Bishop Joel Jeune about the Jericho march at *Bwa Kayiman*, we not only see a Protestant confrontation with the Haitian state but we also see Haitian Protestantism as a transnational political movement. According to Bishop Jeune, on the day of the confrontation (14 August 1998):

The Lord spoke clearly to me as well as many other Haitian leaders such as Paul and Gerald Clerie of Vision: Haiti, and others for mobilisation to take back the land [of *Bwa Kayiman*] for God. Haitian Christian leaders all over Haiti as well as in Florida, New York, Canada, France, and in all big Haitian communities around the world, and Christians of other nationalities, were mobilised to get together wherever they were on August 14, 1998 to fast and intensely pray to claim Haiti back for God while the holy invasion took place on the devil’s territory in Bois-Caiman. So in all the cities, villages, mountains of Haiti, and in the Haitian diaspora a day of fasting, prayer, victory marches in the streets, and a big crusade went on all day from 6:00 a.m. to 10:00 p.m. while the holy invasion was taking place on that devil-ground in Haiti<sup>15</sup>.

As this report reflects, the view of the Vodou ceremony at *Bwa Kayiman* as the moment when Haiti was consecrated to the Devil is a view that is shared by some Protestants within Haiti and Haiti’s Protestant diaspora scattered across Canada, France, the Caribbean, and the United States. The fact that these different Haitian Protestant communities were fasting, praying, holding crusades and victory marches in the streets and participating in Protestant rituals to rid Haiti of *move espri* (evil spirits) can be interpreted as transnational Haitian Protestant political action with a goal to rid the country of spirits (ancestral spirits from the point of view of Vodou practitioners) that has mired Haiti in a socioeconomic crisis that began with the *Bwa Kayiman* Vodou ceremony. This interpretation of *Bwa Kayiman*, as well as a general view of Vodou as a regressive religion of evil and retribution, is also shared by some Haitian Protestants living in the Bahamas.

#### 4. Haitian Protestants in the Bahamas and Vodou

Due to Haiti’s recurring economic and environmental crises, Haitians migrate to other countries within the Caribbean region as a way to counter debilitating poverty, unemployment, and environmental degradation. A historically popular migratory destination is the Bahamas, an archipelagic nation-state consisting of over 700 islands and cays covering some 225,000 square miles of one of the most strategic positions in the Atlantic Ocean (Bethel 2000, p. 21)”. As scholars of Bahamian culture and history confirm, when Haitians migrate to the Bahamas, they do not necessarily do so with the intention of settling there (see Craton 1995; Craton and Saunders 1998; Marshall 1979; St. Jacques 2001). Most Haitians make their way to the capital, Nassau, located on the island of New Providence where two-thirds of the population of the Bahamas lives. New Providence is also where most of the country’s employment opportunities are to be found. Many Haitians live in the Bahamas with the intention of working there temporarily and view life there as a way to support family in Haiti or as a temporary destination before they migrate to the United States or return to Haiti.

<sup>15</sup> <http://groups.yahoo.com/group/Carrefour/message/222>.

Many Haitians who migrate to the Bahamas are Protestants and their political views cannot be separated from their religious views. In interviews I conducted with them in 2005, my informants were asked two questions concerning Haiti and contemporary Haitian society. The first question was “What is your opinion of Haiti’s social situation?” The second question was “What does Haiti need to change its current social situation?” In response to the first question, the majority of respondents described the country’s current situation in overwhelmingly negative terms, viewing no hope for Haiti. When the second question was answered, the majority of respondents referred to God as the only way for Haiti’s endemic poverty and political and social instability to stabilize<sup>16</sup>. Regardless of their denominational affiliation, many blamed the enduring practice of Vodou for the crisis in Haiti. Furthermore, Protestants viewed Vodou as a way of life that has deleterious effects on social life in Haiti. What follows is an excerpt from an interview with a Haitian Protestant that demonstrates this view of Vodou among Haitian Protestants in the Bahamas.

## 5. Sister Maude and Vodou

I interviewed Sister Maude<sup>17</sup> on 6 September 2005. At the time of our interview, she was 31 years old. She converted to Protestantism (the Baptist faith) in Haiti when she was 13 years old and was baptized at age 17. Unlike the majority of Haitians in the Bahamas who migrate from the Northwest state of Haiti (*depatman Nòdwès*), she was from Port-au-Prince. Before her migration to the Bahamas, she attended L’Église Baptiste Patriarche de Caseau, a Charismatic Baptist church in Port-au-Prince. She explained to me how her family was “deep into Vodou” and listed different family members that served *lwa* (spirits). In the following interview excerpt, Sister Maude links poverty, underdevelopment and violence in Haiti directly with the continued practice of Vodou in Haiti. As part of her interview, I asked her to describe Haiti’s socioeconomic situation at the time. She replied “I don’t see anything for Haiti. For Haiti to change its current situation, the people have to stop committing crimes, stop the blood from running in the streets, and turn their faces towards God. Turn their faces towards God because the people, the Haitian people, have consecrated the country with the Devil.”<sup>18</sup>

Since Sister Maude brought up the topic, I asked her a follow-up question that got to the heart of views of Vodou that reflect her religious beliefs. Specifically, I asked her opinion of Vodou and what effects the continued practice of Vodou has on Haitian society. She responded:

Haitians give Vodou top place in Haitian society. They give it the top place . . . It’s the reason why the country is in the state it’s in, you understand what I’m saying?

Imagine a person, a little peasant who can’t eat but has a goat, and is feeding it, fattening it up to give to *lwa* (spirits), to give *lwa* food every year. While this person is fattening the goat this person has children, this person has who knows how many children they can’t send to school. And then this person has to save what they have; to give *lwa* food.

What is this person giving their food to? Some talking (incantations), something this person does (rituals associated with Vodou), and then throws the stuff on the floor?

Imagine a person who goes to a sacred tree every year and then rolls around in the mud, a place that’s dirty, a place that smells like a place where a pig would roll around in. How

<sup>16</sup> At first glance, the comment that “only God can change Haiti” made by Haitian Protestants interviewed in New Providence, Bahamas appears to relieve Haitian Protestants from any individual responsibility from transforming Haiti. I argue that by invoking God and linking God to the amelioration of life in Haiti, the Protestant God that Haitian Protestants follow becomes the only way for Haiti’s endemic poverty to be eradicated and for Haiti to stabilize economically and politically so that some can eventually return to their homeland or others could live outside of Haiti without the burden of remittances and other transnational obligations.

<sup>17</sup> Since many Haitians live in the Bahamas as undocumented migrants, I have changed the names of the Haitian Protestant participants I interviewed in the Bahamas in order to protect their identities.

<sup>18</sup> Maude (2005), Interview with the author, 6 September 2005.

can you make me understand for the Devil . . . that this is not misery that the Devil's creating in the country?

Do you understand what I'm saying? Because if you're not a pig there's no reason for you to be rolling around in the mud. How does someone bathe in dirty water, in mud? The person is not a pig. This is normal for a pig. I think that all of our ignorance, the Haitian people, causes the country to be in the state that it's in. For there to be true change in Haiti there needs to be no less than everyone saying "Ok, I renounce all of the worthless *lwa*, all of the worthless saints, all of the worthless statues . . . and well, turn their faces towards God and that's when God will say something on their behalf. But as long as they continue to give *lwa* food, worship sacred trees, make a bunch of faces, the country will never change. Instead of changing it will get worse . . . That means that a president will never be able to change it (the country) . . . Only God can change it (the situation) (Maude 2005).<sup>19</sup>

According to her worldview, which is structured according to her religious beliefs, Sister Maude feels that Haiti was consecrated to the Devil, a term directly used by Pastor Chavannes and other Haitian Protestants I interviewed while I was in the Bahamas in 2005. Sister Maude interprets Haiti's current crisis as a spiritual crisis that can only be transformed through the catalytic action of the Holy Spirit. She contrasts her religious beliefs with her strong belief in the assumed deleterious effects of Vodou on Haitian citizens. In her examples of people who practice Vodou, Sister Maude believes that the practice of Vodou encourages wasting one's money and promotes ignorance among Haitian citizens. Sister Maude feels that the only true transformation of Haiti into a safer, stable nation-state is through the conversion of Vodou practicing Haitian citizens into devout Protestants. Religious authenticity is then the key to the transformation of Haiti from the poorest country in the Western hemisphere into a viable, modern nation-state.

## 6. Sister Ann and Vodou

As Sister Maude demonstrates, some Haitian Protestants view Vodou as a backward religion, a belief in superstitions that cause Haitians who practice it not only to waste money but stay in poverty as a direct result of proper service to *lwa* evidenced in the fattening of a goat. But this Haitian Protestant view of Vodou also contains the belief that Vodou is used to harm others. This is evident in the comments of Sister Ann.

At the time of our interview Sister Ann, a Haitian woman in her twenties, attended a Haitian Baptist church in New Providence, taught Sunday school and was a member of the church's *lajènes* (church youth) group. She was a nominal Catholic before she converted to Protestantism at a Baptist crusade in her teens and attended a Charismatic Baptist church in Haiti's Northwestern department for two years before she migrated to the Bahamas. A belief shared by all Haitians, regardless of religious affiliation, is that *maji* (sorcery) can be used against one's enemies. This belief was apparent in Sister Ann's interview when she described an incident in her church:

"People from Haiti . . . it's not just people from Haiti, all Haitians, people from Haiti say that if Protestants have a disagreement with someone they say that Protestant will go to the Vodou Priest's house to fix that person. Here in Nassau, Protestants say they'll "go to Haiti" for the person. For example, a woman had a problem with another person at the church and in front of the woman, in front of the church she said "*M prale Ayiti pou ou* (I'm going to Haiti to "fix" you).

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<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

(Sister Ann then grabs a photo album and flips through the pages. While she is looking she says . . . ) she told her that she's going to Haiti, she'll have her killed by going to Haiti . . . she's going to Haiti to have her killed (She finds a picture) . . . the mother of this young woman.

This is a Haitian problem, it's not a problem Haitians have because of Nassau. The person said she's Protestant but she has a problem with someone, she says to the person "I'm Protestant but my father isn't". This means that she has a spirit to do evil things, to steal, things like that . . . (Ann 2005)<sup>20</sup>

According to some Haitian Protestants, Vodou is understood as a backward religion that promotes ignorance (Sister Maude) and encourages its followers to use it as a tool to rid their enemies (Sister Ann). Vodou is interpreted by many Haitian Protestants as a religion of the Devil whereby its followers pray to idols that imbue them with spirits of evil. The devout practice of Protestant Christianity, then, becomes the only logical religious choice for any Haitian concerning not only their personal salvation but ensuring a positive future for Haiti. Many Haitian Protestants believe that conversion to Protestant forms of Christianity teaches fellow Haitians to love each other evidenced in passages from the Holy Bible that Protestants memorize in Bible study and Sunday school<sup>21</sup>. Vodou, by contrast, supposedly teaches you to hate your neighbor by wishing their downfall by using *maji* (magic) against them. Vodou is, in the imagination of many Haitian Protestants, a religious "Culture of Poverty," an adaptation to a set of objective conditions that is transmitted from generation to generation that keeps Haiti from developing into modern, civilized and liberated nation (Lewis 1968). The practice of Protestant forms of Christianity, then, becomes the only logical religious choice for any Haitian concerning not only their personal salvation but ensuring a positive future for Haiti.

## 7. Haiti's Pact with the Devil?

This alternative reading of Haitian history reveals more about Haitian Protestant views about Vodou than it does about why the first nation in the Western hemisphere to abolish chattel slavery, seems "cursed." In other words, the enduring practice of Vodou, in the view of some Haitian Protestants, is the reason why Haiti is so poor, why its economy is in shambles, and why God chose to "punish" the island and its people with an earthquake.

Some Haitian Protestants who hold this view choose to scapegoat Vodou instead of looking at other parts of Haitian history which explain Haiti's current misery, such as the multimillion franc indemnity Haiti paid to France, beginning in the nineteenth century, so that France would not invade Haiti after the Haitian Revolution. We can also look to the exploitative relationship between Haiti's upper classes and majority poor for explanations of why poverty and underdevelopment are seemingly natural in Haiti. Additionally, we can also look at the period when the Duvalier dictatorship (1957–1986) ruled Haiti through fear and violence, while siphoning millions of dollars of taxes and international aid for itself, as the historical period when Haiti actually became the poorest country in the Western Hemisphere. While Jean-Claude Duvalier, who ruled from 1971–1986, and members of his circle grew fabulously rich, the majority of Haitians slipped deeper into poverty. The percentage of the Haitian population living in extreme poverty rose from 48 per cent in 1976 to 81 percent in 1985. This all occurred with support from varying American presidential administrations, which includes the American-chartered jet which took Jean-Claude from Haiti in 1986.

The view that Haiti consecrated itself to the Devil more than 200 years ago is highly problematic especially when we consider the future of contemporary Haiti. First, Haitian Protestants who believe that Haiti was consecrated to the Devil at *Bwa Kayiman* condemn the slaves responsible for dismantling

<sup>20</sup> Sister Ann, Interview with the author, 13 July 2005.

<sup>21</sup> An example of this belief can be found in I John Chapter 3, verses 18 and 19 "Dear children, let us stop just saying we love each other; let us really show it by our actions. It is by our actions that we know we are living in truth, so we will be confident when we stand before the Lord." Holy Bible, New Living Translation.



chattel slavery in Saint Domingue, and by extension their descendants, instead of condemning the institution of slavery itself that produced profits for slave owners and structural poverty and misery for the slaves. Thus, this problematic view of Haitian history suggests that chattel slavery in Saint Domingue was a benign institution, or at least that it did not in fact merit the revolt of slaves.

Furthermore, the view that the ancestors of modern Haiti made a pact with the Devil in order to defeat colonial powers suggests that the ancestors of Haiti needed supernatural intervention to defeat white supremacy in Saint Domingue. There were numerous factors that made the Haitian Revolution the first and only successful slave revolt in human history but the most important factor that contributed to its success was the central role played by the blacks. As scholars Charles Arthur and Michael Dash write “over the course of an epic twelve year struggle, the slaves defeated the local whites, the forces of the French Crown, a Spanish and a British invasion, and the massive expeditionary force sent by Napoleon Bonaparte (Arthur and Dash 1999, pp. 19–20),” with immense credit for these victories being due to Toussaint Louverture, the man who quickly emerged as the leader of the black armies. By viewing *Bwa Kayiman* as a satanic pact which doomed modern Haiti and mires contemporary Haiti in human misery, the Haitian revolution as a victory against the dehumanizing effects of chattel slavery are erased from history and white supremacy is naturalized and made triumphant precisely because it goes unanalyzed and unquestioned.

Finally, the most important aspect of the Haitian revolution that is silenced in the belief that Haiti’s woes can be attributed to a pre-revolutionary “curse” is that the Haitian revolution demonstrated that black people (people of African descent) are human beings with the right to live dignified lives. This is a struggle that Haitians and other people of African descent are currently engaged in throughout the globe. The middle passage (where millions of Africans died in transport to the Americas), centuries of dehumanizing chattel slavery, and the subsequent psychological and physical violence occurring on plantations, tried to disprove the fundamental humanity of the black people who fought for the right to live free and dignified lives.

## 8. A Protestant Future for Haiti?

The humanity of modern Haitians, then, cannot be reconciled through pride in the revolutionary roots of Haitian history, which is based on a Faustian pact with the Devil, according to the worldview of Haitian Protestantism. The humanity of modern Haitians can only be reconciled only through the blood of Jesus. In other words, Haitians who practice Vodou must *al konvèti* (convert): become a Protestant Christian who rejects and protests aspects of their country’s Africanized history and culture. The individual is also supposed to make a radical break from their African past to become part of a religious project which has as its ultimate goal the rehabilitation of a nation (Haiti).

Through the logic of fundamentalist Christianity then, Haiti can finally be integrated into the larger surrounding world and global economy by becoming a Protestant Christian nation. Haiti would be part of a larger, global Christian community. And those Haitian Protestants who believe so see the future of Haiti as a nation with Christ as its foundation and expressing fundamentalist Christian values. We can use Pastor Chavannes Jeune as an example of this growing belief. As part of Pastor Chavannes’ 2010 presidential platform<sup>22</sup>, he emphasized that he was a candidate with integrity and would fight corruption, a characteristic attributed to numerous moments in the history of the Haitian state. In being a candidate who self-proclaims his integrity and vows to fight corruption, he is a more convincing candidate to fellow Haitian Evangelicals due to the belief that his Protestant character (*karaktè*) is incorruptible.

According to Celucien Joseph, there are numerous Haitian theologians, prominent Protestant pastors and leaders (Jules Casséus, Mario Valcin, Lauture Magloire, and Jean Duthene Joseph, for example) who “maintain the belief that Vodou is primarily responsible for Haiti’s underdevelopment

<sup>22</sup> <http://chavannesjeune.com/en/welcome>.



and perceived as an obstacle to modernity and democratic progress (Joseph 2016, p. 247). Both Casséus and Duthene Joseph sought and completed additional theological training in the United States which contributed to their negative critiques of Vodou (Casséus finished his doctoral studies in 1977 from Colgate Rochester Divinity School. Jean Duthene Joseph is a graduate of Dallas Theological Seminary and holds a doctorate from Trinity Theological Seminary from 2006).

The Haitian Protestant critique of *Bwa Kayiman*, one of the most important moments in Haitian history, then, is not solely ahistorical and fundamentalist. Rather, it is an interpretation of Haitian history which rejects its African roots and which has as its goals to reintegrate Haiti as a respected nation among nations through a globalized, Christian identity which resonates with American Evangelicalism. It relies on erasing the centrality of white hegemony in the creation of a dehumanizing socioeconomic system based on extraction and violence and blaming blacks in their search for a solution to their bondage. Haitian Protestantism, at times, internalizes a form of anti-Black racism that absolves past and continued white exploitation of Haiti and views Vodou, a syncretic religion that emerges from the violent history of the Atlantic slave trade and chattel slavery, as pathological.

The view that the ancestors of Haitians made a “pact with the Devil” also erases Haiti’s role in a larger, modern human rights movement that squarely places people of African descent at the center of it all. Specifically, Haiti was the first country to articulate a general principle of common, unqualified equality for all of its citizens. The fundamental concept of a common humanity also ran deeply through the early Haitian constitutions.

In 2019, Haitians suffer from three forms of violence that violate their human rights: physical violence, symbolic violence, and structural violence. Haitians experience physical violence through attacks from the Haitian state while protesting alleged governmental corruption from the Jovenel Moïse administration and a United Nations occupying force that reintroduced cholera to Haiti that has sickened close to a million Haitians and killed close to 10,000 of them (Louis 2019). Haitians are subjected to symbolic violence from how the country is negatively portrayed in the press on a consistent basis. Additional forms of symbolic violence come from the influx of American missionaries that descended on Haiti in the wake of the 2010 earthquake. Africana Studies scholar Celucien Joseph writes that the “number of American evangelical missionaries escalated following the earthquake of January 2010 that devastated Haiti—giving the evangelical narrative that the earthquake was a punishment by God (Joseph 2016, p. 245). Haitians also suffer from structural violence due to poverty, governmental corruption, and external globalization forces such as the International Monetary Fund that create in-country austerity conditions and exacerbate preexisting poverty. All of these egregious forms of violence coalesce to create a potent form of anti-black violence which violates the basic human rights of Haitians as outlined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. It also continues the theme of anti-black violence which began with the situation of their ancestors who struggled to end the normative violence associated with plantation slavery. Combating the view that Haiti is cursed requires placing it in its proper historical context which reveals larger issues of Eurocentric colonization and globalized capitalist structural inequality, particularly played by the United States and France—forces that prevent Haitians, and people of African descent, from living dignified lives in the twenty-first century (Maguire and Freeman 2017; Loewenstein 2014; Smith 2019).

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